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ABSTRACT

Despite pervasive and far-reaching changes in the institution of the family in this century, demographic data suggest not a breakdown of the American family; rather, significant change has occurred in its structure and function. Timing of family formation and childbearing, household size and living arrangements, marital stability (including racial differences), and labor force status of married women are sociodemographic indicators that describe changes both in rural and urban areas. Comparing profiles of family characteristics from 1950 to 1970 indicates that urban-rural differences in family structure persist. Rural people still marry earlier than urban counterparts, have more children, and live in larger households. Fewer rural women participate in the labor force, and fewer rural marriages end in divorce. However, changes affecting urban families also affect rural ones and the recent turnaround between population growth in urban and rural areas holds important implications. For urban and rural areas, marriage age has increased, current fertility and household size are down, divorce rate is up, and women's participation in the labor force has grown. In general, the proportion of life spent outside a family unit is growing, child care increasingly falls to third parties, and the husband-wife relationship is more egalitarian. Yet, most people eventually marry, and most children are raised in husband-wife families. (RS)

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RECENT CHANGES IN THE DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE OF URBAN AND RURAL FAMILIES

David L. Brown

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

Paper presented at the Second Annual Symposium on Child Development and Family Studies, Purdue University, February 7, 1977.

ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE

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Working Paper No. 7706

RECENT CHANGES IN THE DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE OF URBAN AND RURAL FAMILIES

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The structure of American society has undergone rapid and pervasive changes during the 20th century, and few institutions have changed more than the family. This paper focuses on changes in particular dimensions of family structure as they are described by sociodemographic indicators such as the amount of timing of family formation and childbearing, household size and living arrangements, marital stability, and the labor force status of married women. In addition, changes in the family structure of urban and rural areas will be compared. It will be shown that these aspects of family structure are interrelated and cannot be discussed as discrete topics in isolation from one another.

Slowdown in Marriage and Childbearing

Economic, political, and social conditions of the past 40 years have been accompanied by marked fluctuations in many aspects of marriage and the family. For example, the economic gloom of the Great Depression occurred simultaneously with etremely low rates of marriage and childbearing . . . .a near record 9 percent of adult women during this period never married. The marriage rate began to rise early in World War II, declined somewhat during the War, and then increased substantially from 1946 through the mid-1950's, a period of relative stability in economic and political affairs. During the fifties, couples entered marriages at the youngest ages on record (average for males, 22.5 years; females, 20.1 years), and all but 4 percent of those at the height of the childbearing period eventually married (Glick, 1975).

Recently, the marriage rate has fallen to its lowest level since the end of the Depression. In 1975 the average age at marriage (males, 23.5 years; females, 21.1 years) was nearly a year higher than in the mid-1950's, and the proportion of women who remained single until they were 20 to 24 years old increased by one-third above the 28 percent single at these ages in 1960 (Figure 1) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975). This recent downturn in marriage is associated with current economic conditions, but more importantly, it is connected with sociocultural changes in our attitudes regarding the permissibility of women's work outside of the home, and the viability of alternative living arrangements to the traditional nuclear family for at least part of one's adult life. The determinants and consequences of these issues--marital disruption, labor force participation among women, and the rise of the primary individual--are discussed in later sections of this paper, but first, a few comments on the implications of the downturn in marriage for the level of childbearing in our society.

The family is part of the institutional structure through which a society replaces its population. It is the unit in which reproduction is authorized and expected, and consequently, changes in the marriage rate and/or the age at first marriage may affect a society's level of fertility. Hence, there is little question that recent declines in the marriage rate for young women in the United States have contributed to our low level of current fertility. In 1976 the birthrate fell to its lowest recorded level, 14.7 births per 1,000 population, a decline of 20 percent from its level of 18.4 births per 1,000 population just 5 years before in 1970 (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 1976). This low birthrate is reflected in the growth of American

population between 1975 and 1976, 0.66 percent, one of the lowest rates of growth in any year since the Depression of the 1930's. However, the potential for growth currently exists. The number of persons in the prime childbearing ages is now quite large (a legacy of the post-War baby boom), and recent surveys of birth expectations indicate that young women still intend to have at least two births each (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). Hence, if these persons actualize their preferences, we can expect the growth rate of the population to accelerate somewhat in the near future.

Upturn in Divorce

Accompanying the recent downturn in marriage has been a continuation of the longterm trend of increased divorce (Figure 2). The number of divorces per 1,000 women under 45 years of age in the United States increased by two-thirds between the mid-1950's and 1970. Moreover, for the last 30 years, the proportion of women whose first marriage ended in divorce by a given period of life has gone up consistently. For example, the percent divorced by their early 30's has more than doubled from 6.3 percent in 1950 to 15.8 percent in 1970. Moreover, it has been estimated that between 25 and 29 percent of the women now in their late 20's will end their first marriage in divorce sometime during their life. This compares with only 12 percent for women now in their late 60's (Glick and Norton, 1973).

The rising level of divorce in our society has been a cause for substantial concern. It is one of the statistics most often cited by those who fear a breakdown in the American family. However, this belief is not shared by numerous observers of family trends, many of whom believe that divorce is an appropriate method of resolving a poor marriage. Indeed, this latter position tends to be shared by large segments of our population. Consider the case of those in public life. Not many years ago, the stigma attached to divorce was

a heavy liability for candidates for public office. Today, the stigma appears to have diminished, a fact that tends to be supported by the marital histories of many of our highest level officials.

What factors are associated with the upturn in divorce? All other factors considered, low age at marriage appears to be a basic determinant. Persons who marry before age 20 have substantially higher rates of marital disruption than those who marry at older ages.

What is it about young marriages that make them so susceptible to divorce? To begin with, a significant number of early marriages are precipitated by premarital pregnancy. Also, many persons who marry young have a low level of formal education. However, recent research has shown that the lower stability of early marriages is not due simply to their association with low education or premarital pregnancy. Young age at marriage, in and of itself, has an independent effect on divorce. To the extent that role patterns are tentative in the late teens and tend to stabilize with increasing age, post-marriage divergence in the spouses' expectations may be more likely for young marriages (Bumpass and Sweet, 1973).

Homogamy, the similarity between spouses in significant social characteristics, has also been shown to affect the probability of divorce. Higher instability was found for couples divergent in age or religion, while only extreme differences in education were associated with marital disruption. The greater probability of success for homogamous marriage is usually attributed to the greater liklihood of value consensus between spouses in basic life goals and priorities and to similarity of expectations for marital roles (Bumpass and Sweet, 1973).

In addition, recent increases in divorce appear to be associated with a number of societal conditions: (a) the large number of men who lived apart

from their wives while on military duty during the Vietnam War, (b) the low fertility rate among women of reproductive age (to the extent that the presence of young children inhibits divorce), and (c) increased employment opportunities for women. Liberalized divorce laws have also been pointed to as a factor in increased divorce, although some recent research casts doubt on this explanation (Schoen et al., 1975).

Racial Differences in Marital Stability

The Moynihan Report generated interest in the family structure of blacks in the United States. Moynihan argued that among blacks, particularly among those at lower socioeconomic levels, there was a trend away from family stability (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965). However, recent research by Farley and Hermalin (1971) demonstrates that, "Contrary to images which are sometimes portrayed, most black families are husband-wife families and the majority of black children live with both parents."

However, this is not to suggest that there are no racial differences in indicators of marital stability. The data indicate that in every case, a higher proportion of whites than blacks are in the status indicative of family stability. Moreover, among blacks, there has been an increase in the proportion of women who head families and a decline in the proportion of children who live with both parents (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1974). It should be pointed out, however, that the effect of growing up in a disrupted family is not well understood at this time. A number of studies indicate that the effects on "life chances" are minimal compared with other factors such as discrimination in the labor market and the poor quality of formal education.

Increased Labor Force Participation Among Women

Recent expansions in the Nation's labor force have focused attention on the growing number of women in our labor supply. Since 1940 the labor force participation rate of women has increased from 13.8 percent to 39.6 percent. Moreover, the relationship between female labor force participation and the family life cycle has changed as well.

Figure 3 allows us to review the labor force participation of women during this century (Oppenheimer, 1973). In 1900, if the average woman worked at all during her lifetime, it was only for a brief period before marriage and childbearing. By 1940 the rates showed some changes in the degree of labor force participation, but the pattern by age was similar to that of 1900. Since 1940 significant changes have occurred in the age (and family life cycle) pattern of female employment. The 1950 Census showed a sharp increase over the 1940 Census in work rates for women aged 35 and over--those whose children, by and large, had reached school age. This pattern has persisted so that by 1970 between 49 and 54 percent of women in the 35-59 year age groups were in the labor force.

In addition, labor force participation of younger, married women, those with preschool children, has increased as well. In 1950 work for married women (husband present) in the 20-34 year age group was a rare occurrence. By 1970 work rates for women in these age groups approached 40 to 50 percent. Work is becoming an important and continuing part of women's lives, not just before they marry and start rearing children.

What factors are associated with the probability that women will participate in the labor force? Recent studies indicate that the probability of

wife's work is increased by family economic pressure (as indexed by husband's income) and by wife's level of employability and earnings potential (as indexed by educational attainment and/or prior work experience) (Morgan et al., 1962 and 1966).

In addition, family composition has also been shown to affect labor force participation of married women. For example, Sweet (1970) demonstrated that employment status is associated with the number and ages of children and with the presence of other adults (besides the parents) in the household. He explains that family status constrains the employment of women in the following ways: (a) the older the youngest child, the lower the probability that a mother will regard her employment as an inappropriate activity; (b) the younger the youngest child and the more children there are, the more housework that needs to be performed (both routine housework and "mothering"); and (c) the younger the youngest child, the greater the difficulty in arranging satisfactory child care and the greater the probability that child care will be expensive and reduce the net economic benefit from employment. The presence of another adult (especially a relative) in the household is likely to moderate the inhibiting effects of child status on mother's work by facilitating reliable and inexpensive child care arrangements and by helping with household maintenance.

Thus, although there has been a marked decrease over time in the inhibiting effects of small children on mother's work activity, the number and ages of children are still of extreme importance. Moreover, numerous studies show that family size expectations are tied to expectations for careers and other nonfamily-oriented activities. Women who plan to hold paid employment plan to have smaller families than women who have no plans to enter the labor force

(Waite and Stolzenberg, 1976). Female labor force participation is an important issue, in and of itself, but it is also important because it is both a determinant and consequence of other aspects of family structure such as age at marriage, divorce, and fertility.

Decline in Household Size

One of the most dramatic occurrences in American demographic history has been the decline in average household size . . . from 5.8 persons in 1790 to 2.89 persons in 1976 (figure 4). What factors account for this decline? Demographic changes in fertility and mortality have had a major impact. For example, declines in fertility reduced the number of very large household units while declines in mortality enlarged the number of very small units by increasing the time couples survive after their children have established their own households (the so-called "empty nest" stage in the family life cycle). As a result of these demographic processes, the proportion of small households (two to four persons) increased continuously from 1790 to 1950 from one-third to over two-thirds of all households. However, in 1950 the number of four-persons households was still much greater than the proportion with only one member.

The continued fall in household size since 1950 is attributable to the growth of very small households (one to two persons). One-person households grew from 4-5 percent of all units in 1900 to 19.6 percent in 1975. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). Are demographic forces the main determinants behind recent declines in household size as they were in declines through 1950? For example, has the increase in primary individuals (one-person households) come at the oldest ages, as one would predict from knowledge of the aging of the population which has characterized recent times? For males

the answer is no. The total number of male primary individuals tripled between 1950 and 1974 while the number of young (20-34 years of age) primary individuals increased more than eightfold. Clearly, increases in living alone for men have come at an early stage in the life cycle and are associated with moving out of the parental home to college dormitories, military barracks, and most dramatically, to bachelor quarters.

In contrast, the aging of the population and the differential in mortality, which tends to favor older women over men, has been a key factor in enlarging the number of women who live alone. Of the 4.6 million increase in female primary individuals, between 1950 and 1974, 63 percent, or nearly 3 million women, were aged 55-74 years (Kobrin, 1976).

The data reviewed above suggest that the decline in household size has had a significant impact on the family as a social unit. The great increase in persons living separately from families and the concentration of these people at the youngest and oldest stages of the adult life cycle indicate that family membership has become much less continuous over the life cycle. If current trends continue, we may see the time when perhaps less than a majority of adults will be living in families (73.5 percent lived in families in 1970). As Kobrin (1976) points out, this change must necessarily affect the relationships between generations and life cycle patterns of interaction generally.

Rural-Urban Comparisons

As early as 1958, Alvin Bertrand commented that " ... the rural family has quickened its tempo of acceptance of change, and the indications are that it will be more like the urban family in the future." He went on to add that it was impossible to distinguish different trends in rural and

urban family changes.

The data presented in Table 1 show a comparative profile of family characteristics in rural and urban areas from 1950 to 1970. They allow us to ascertain, for selected indicators, whether Bertrand's expectations were accurate i.e., whether rural-urban differences in family structure have diminished, and whether the direction of change in family structure has been similar in rural and urban areas. These data indicate a persistence of urban-rural differences in family structure. Rural people continue to marry earlier than their urban counterparts, have more children, and live in larger households. Labor force participation continues to be lower among rural women, and a smaller proportion of rural marriages end in divorce.

However, these data also show that changes effecting urban families have effected rural families as well. Regardless of residence, the age of marriage has increased, current fertility has declined, household size has diminished, the divorce rate has increased, and the labor force participation rate of women has grown. As a consequence, urban-rural differences in family structure have either diminished or remained constant during the 20 years studied. Hence, while these urban-rural comparisons indicate a persistence of differentiation; they also show a continuity of change.

Rural America has undergone important demographic changes which have direct implications for the rural family. For example, the recent turnaround in the relative rate of population growth between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas has affected the size and composition of the nonmetropolitan population. After two-thirds of a century of uninterrupted transfer of population, activities, and economic resources from smaller to larger places; population and employment are enjoying renewed vitality in nonmetropolitan areas. Between 1970 and 1974, nonmetropolitan counties grew in population by 5.6 percent, compared with only 3.4 percent in metropolitan areas (Beale, 1977). The effect of this renewed growth on age composition is especially important. As we have seen in earlier sections of this paper, age is a prime factor in family formation and childbearing, household size and living arrangements, and marital dissolution.

If migration rates by age had continued from the 1960's into the 1970's, nonmetropolitan areas would have experienced significant losses at the young family ages (20-29 years), and only slight gains among children and older adults. However, the young ages (5-14 years) and middle family ages (35-44 years) showed large nonmetropolitan gains over 1965-70 expectations. Similarly, the retirement age category (65+ years) showed marked gains in nonmetropolitan areas (Figure 5) (Zuiches and Brown, 1977).

To the extent that these recent trends are indicative of the future, we can expect growth in the nonmetropolitan population at the ages where family formation and childbearing are most likely, and at the retirement ages. These are crucial age groups because young families and the elderly need and demand various goods and services that are not always available in sufficient quantity in rural communities.

Young families require additional housing units, child care services, and educational programs; while the elderly may need income maintaince, transportation, and various community, health, and social services.

One of the basic factors which has contributed to the renewal of population growth in nonmetropolitan areas has been the decentralization of employment opportunities. Between 1970 and 1974, the civilian labor force grew by 17 percent in nonmetropolitan areas (3.9 million) compared with only 10 percent in metropolitan areas (6. 3 million) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975). This contrasts sharply with the 1960's when the labor force grew by about 22 percent in metropolitan areas, but only by about 11 percent in nonmetropolitan areas (Hines et al., 1975). Recent increases in the nonmetropolitan labor force are due to the growth of the working age population, but more importantly to increased labor force participation among women (from 30.3 percent in 1960 to 42.8 percent in 1974).

As pointed out earlier, female labor force participation is an important issue in and of itself, but it is also important because it is both a determinant and a consequence of other aspects of family structure such as age at marriage, divorce, and fertility. Thus, the recent increase in labor force participation among rural women has direct implications for the rural family.

Our previous discussion pointed out that work has become an important and continuing part of women's lives, not just before they marry and start raising children. Figure 6 demonstrates that this is true for both rural and urban women. In 1970, the rate of labor force participation among rural women did not fall below 40 percent at any age between 20 and 59; and the

pattern of high participation rates before and after childbearing was characteristic of both urban and rural residence categories. 1/

What kind of jobs are rural women obtaining? Data from the Census of Population demonstrate that rural women have increased in almost every occupation and industry category of employment. They made especially large gains in professional, technical, and clerical white collar pursuits, and in operative and service blue collar jobs. Rural women also made large percentage gains in skilled crafts positions, but the base of employment in 1950 in this category was rather small so percentage gains tend to exaggerate actual growth (Figure 7). Regarding the industrial structure of employment, rural women made large gains in manufacturing, transportation and communication, retail trade, and professional services. Large percentage gains were also registered in wholesale trade, finance insurance and real-estate, business and repair services, and public administration, but once again, these gains were calculated on a small employment base in 1950. (Figure 8).

In urban areas, the occupational pattern of growth in female employment closely matched that of their rural counterparts. However, urban women made somewhat stronger gains in sales positions and substantially smaller gains in operative jobs. Similarly, urban women experienced far smaller rates of growth in manufacturing and several other categories of industrial jobs--transportation, wholesale trade, finance. Regardless of residential location, then, growth of female employment was characteristic of almost all categories of jobs.

1/ However, regardless of residence, the dominant pattern for racial minority women is to work continuously through the family life circle, while white women tend to withdrew from the labor force during their twenties and return to it when their children reach school age.

Conclusion

Sociodemographic indicators have been used to describe changes in the structure and function of the American family during the 20th century. These changes have been pervasive, far reaching, and interrelated with one another. Decline in the marriage rate, for example, is a basic determinant of lower fertility, which in turn, is associated with women's labor force activity, the recent upturn in divorce and the decline in the size of the American household. Moreover, it was shown that these changes characterize both urban and rural areas.

If one inference can be drawn from these sociodemographic indicators, it is that family roles and patterns of family interaction have been modified substantially during recent decades. Nonfamilial activities appear to be of greater importance than in the past; the proportion of the life cycle spent outside of a family unit has increased significantly; child care is increasingly the responsibility of third parties; and the husband-wife relationship has become more egalitarian. Yet, with all this change, there appears to be permanence. Most people eventually marry, and most children are born and raised in husband-wife families. Indeed, viability of the family is even suggested in statistics on divorce. According to the latest information available, about four out of every five of those who obtain a divorce will eventually remarry (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972). Thus, the demographic data presented in this paper do not suggest a breakdown of the American family but, rather, significant modifications in its structure and function in contemporary society.

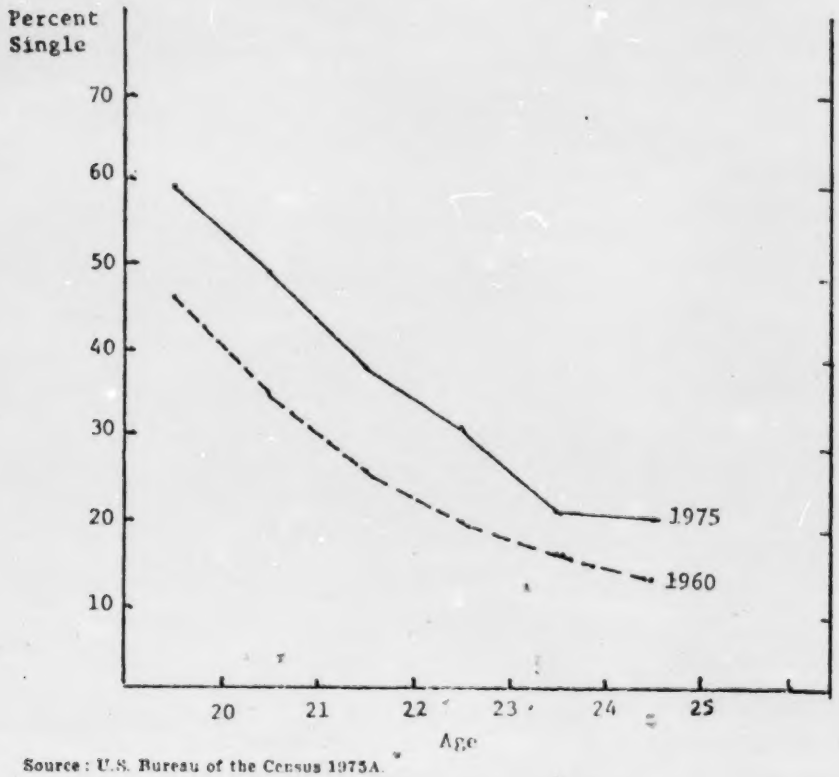
Table 1: Profile of Household and Family Characteristics by Urban - Rural Residence, 1950-1970.

Item and Residence	Year		
	1950	1960	1970
Pct. of women single, 20-24 Years			
Urban	36.0	30.9	39.1
Rural	24.0	21.3	25.7
Child-Women Ratio 1/			
Urban	490.5	653.9	500.6
Rural	711.9	783.4	579.6
Children ever born 2/			
Urban	1978	2436	3027
Rural	2981	3127	3427
Persons per household			
Urban	3.2	3.2	3.0
Rural	3.7	3.6	3.3
Pct. Divorced			
Urban	2.6	2.9	3.8
Rural	1.4	1.6	2.2
Female Labor Force Participation 3/			
Urban	33.2	37.3	41.3
Rural	20.6	27.3	32.7

1/ Population less than 5 yrs. divided by Women 20-44 yrs x 1000.
2/ Children ever born per 1000 ever married women 35-44 yrs.
3/ Population 14 or more years; 1950 and 1970 civilian labor force -- 1960 total labor force which includes 28,000 military.

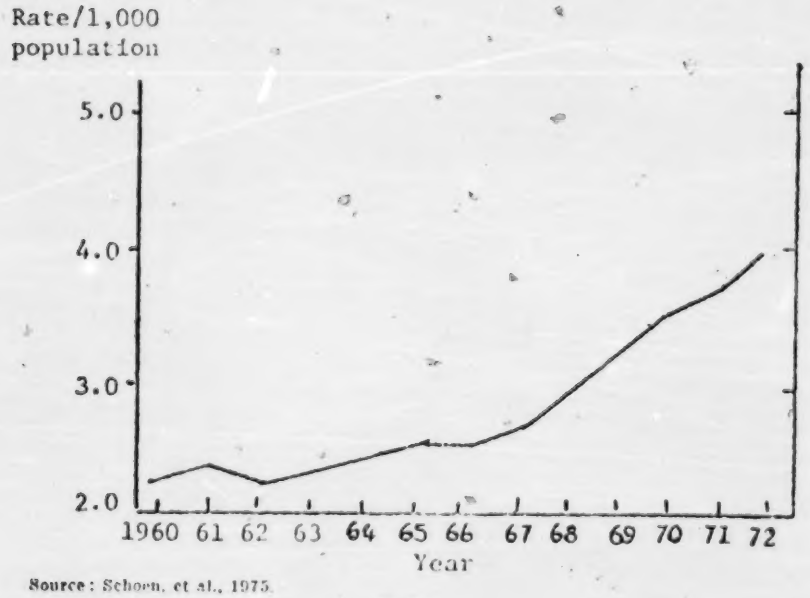
Source: U.S. Census of Population 1950, 1960, 1970: PC (1) - 1, U.S. Summary.

FIGURE 1.—Single Women in the Population by Age: 1960–1975



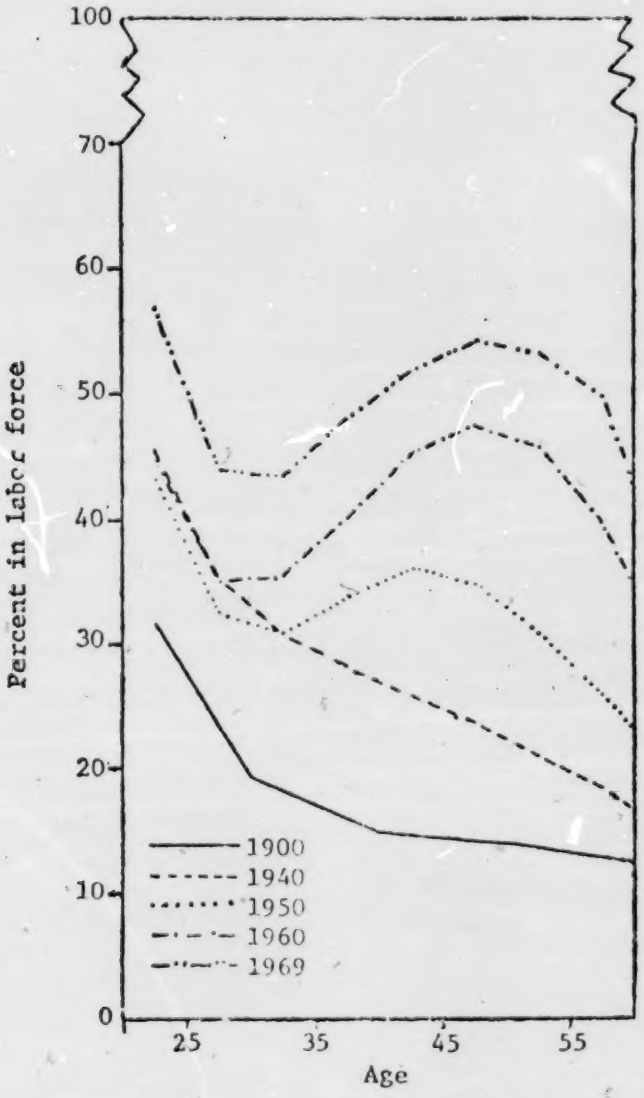
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975A.

FIGURE 2.—Trend in Divorce—Annulment: 1960–1972



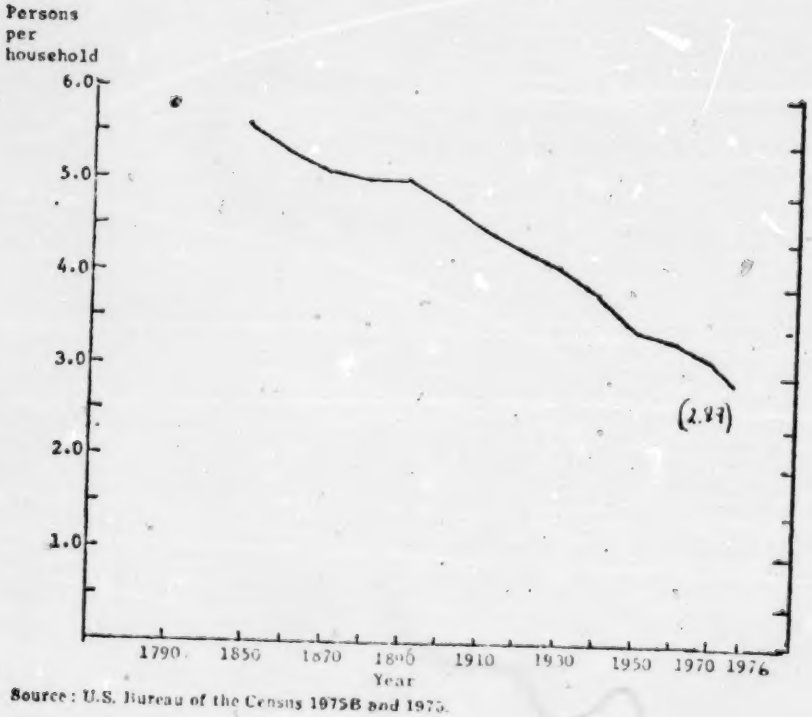
Source: Schoen, et al., 1975.

FIGURE 3.—Female Labor Force Participation by Age, 1900-1969



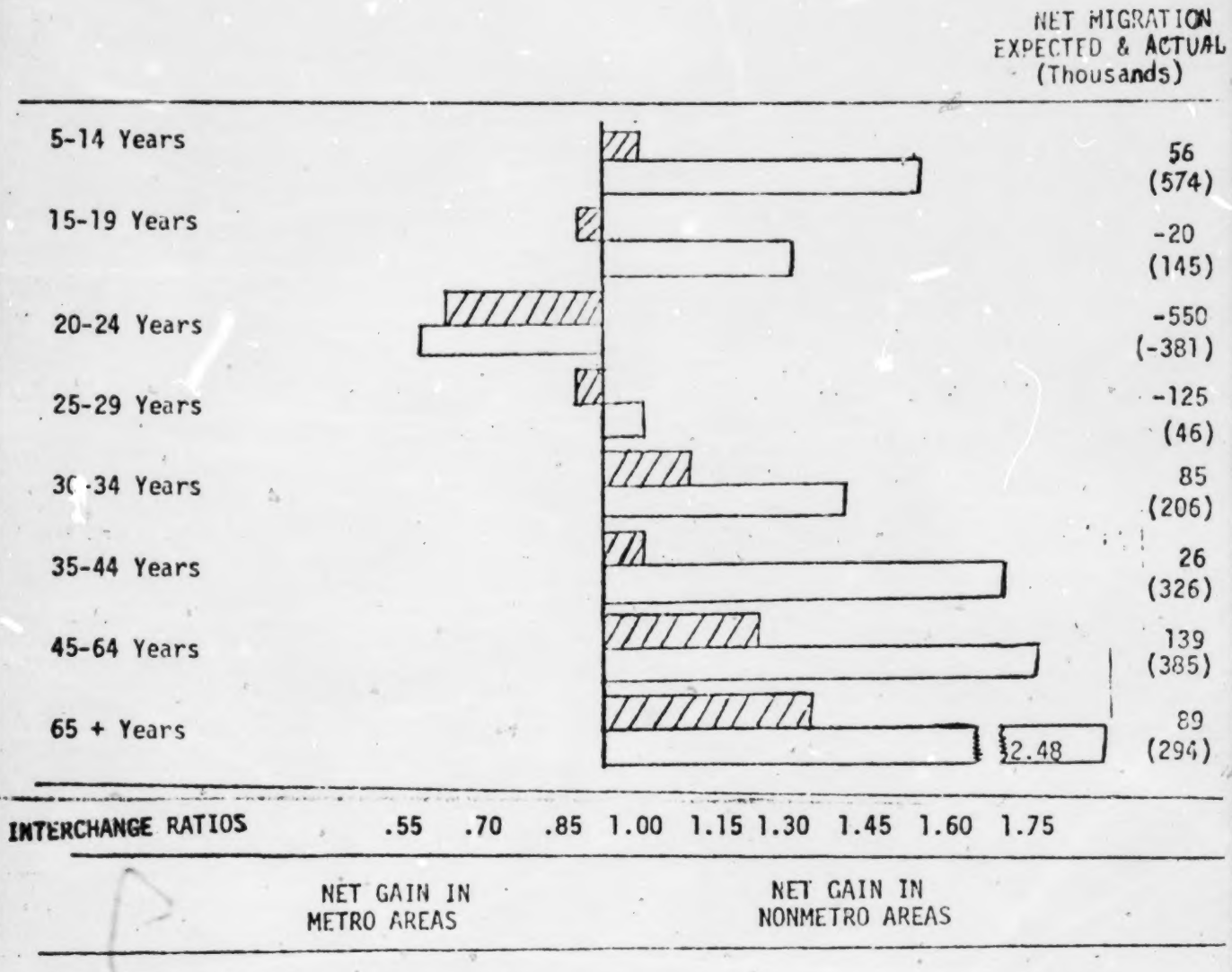
Source: Oppenheimer, 1973

FIGURE 4.—Population Per Household: 1970 1976



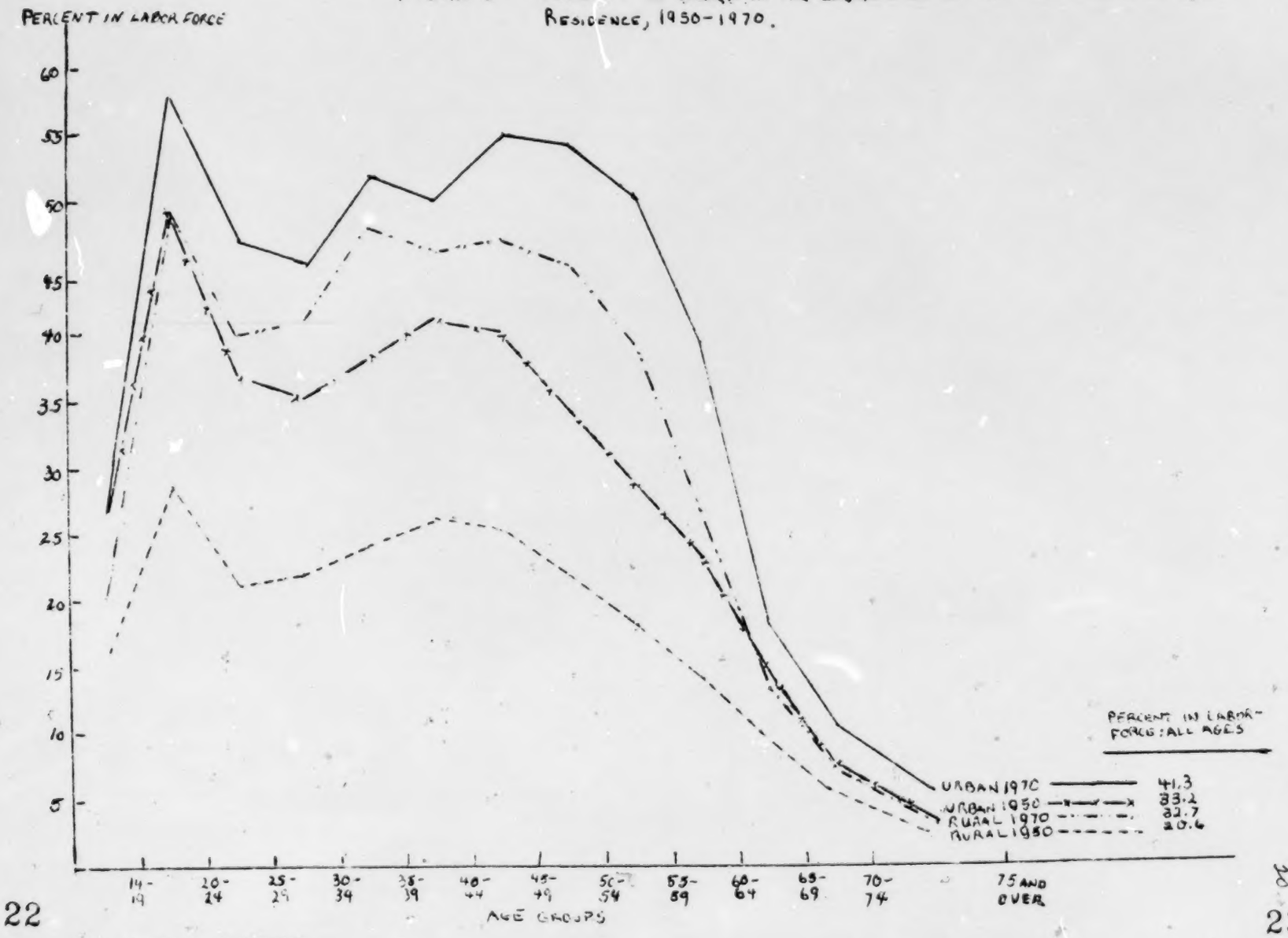
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975B and 1975.

TABLE 5 -- EXPECTED AND ACTUAL NET MIGRATION, BY AGE FOR METROPOLITAN AND NONMETROPOLITAN AREAS, 1970-1975.



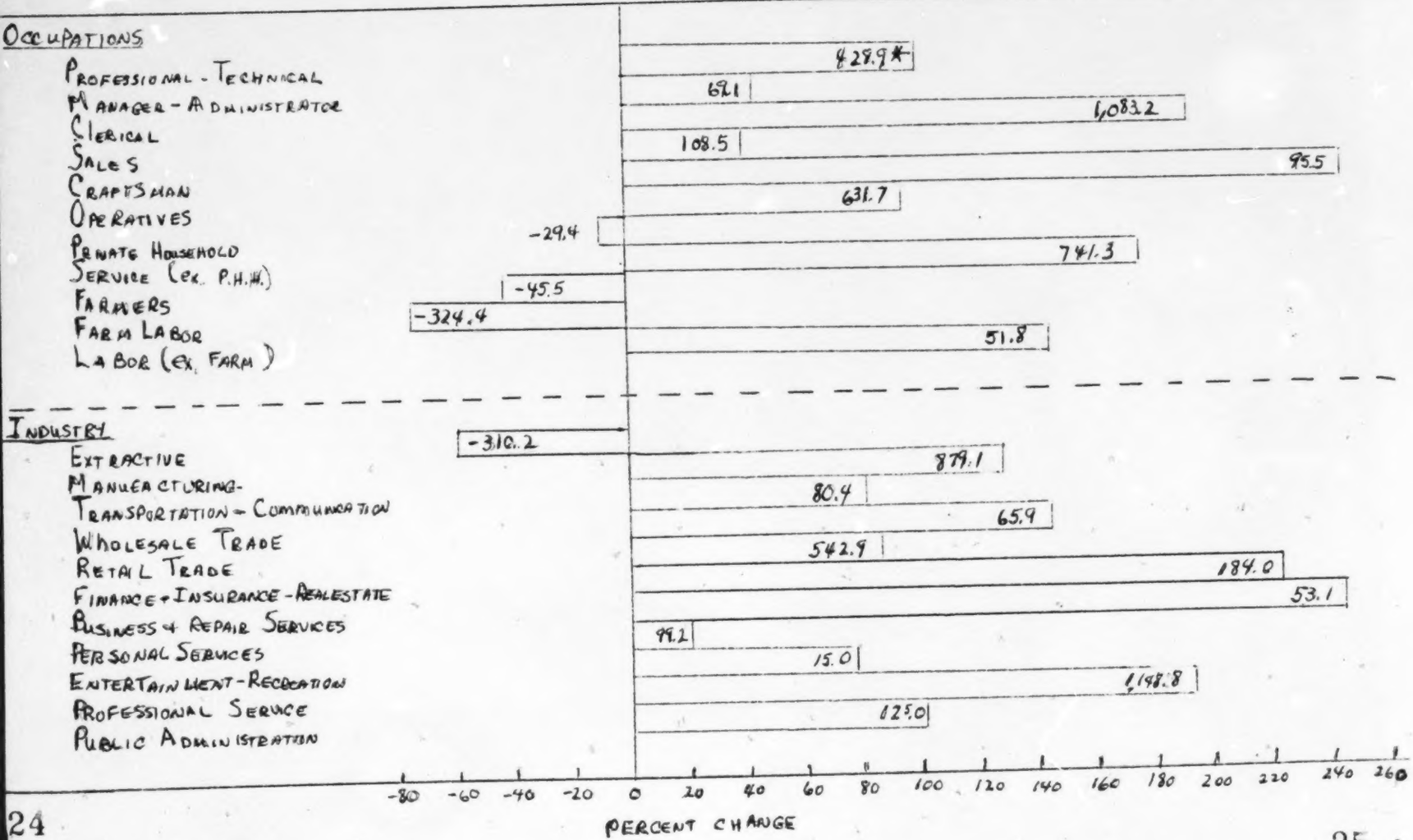
SOURCE: Zuiches and Brown (1977).

FIGURE 6 -- PERCENT OF WOMEN IN THE LABORFORCE BY AGE FOR URBAN AND RURAL RESIDENCE, 1950-1970.



SOURCE U.S. CENSUS

FIGURE 7--CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT OF RURAL WOMEN BY OCCUPATION AND INDUSTRY, 1950-1970



* NUMBERS INDICATE ABSOLUTE CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT. EXPRESSED IN THOUSANDS

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS OF POPULATION

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